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**THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA'S SECURITY  
IN NORTHEAST ASIA A REGIONAL  
STRATEGIC APPRAISAL**

BY

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THE REPUBLIC OF KOREA'S SECURITY IN NORTHEAST ASIA  
A REGIONAL STRATEGIC APPRAISAL

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## ABSTRACT

AUTHOR: Seung Jo Jung(COL), ROKA  
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Although the Cold War is over, the security environment in Northeast Asia is not stable. This study summarizes Korea's national interests from a Korean soldier's perspective. The threats and issues are described according to the format of a regional strategic appraisal. This study recommends the organization of a Conference on Security and Cooperation in Northeast Asia (CSCNEA). This organization would be composed of the two Koreas(or eventually a reunified Korea), the United States, Japan, China, and Russia. Before the establishment of the organization, the enlargement of bilateral cooperation is recommended.

## **Introduction**

With the sudden end of the Cold War, a new world order began to emerge. However, it does not necessarily guarantee a more peaceful world. Although the rivalry between two super powers disappeared, many new powers are emerging and are trying to fill the vacancy.

This is true especially in Northeast Asia. This region was one of the major theaters of the Cold War. Two of the world's five communist countries--China and North Korea--exist in the region. Although the USSR has collapsed, Russia is still trying to maintain its former status in the region. China wants to enlarge its influence. Japan seeks political and military roles corresponding to its economic power.<sup>1</sup> In this turbulent situation, North Korea is attempting to develop nuclear weapons. These factors make the region unstable in the post-Cold War age.

Furthermore, the Cold War still exists on the Korean Peninsula. The Republic of Korea is confronted by North Korea, which has more than one million men in its armed forces. The nations surrounding the Korean Peninsula--the US, Japan, China, and Russia--have the four largest military budgets in the world. This situation provides both opportunity and challenge to the Korean people.

## **The Republic of Korea's National Interests**

The conditions that the Republic of Korea (ROK) desires now

and in the future are:

- An independent nation that ensures the safety of the people, while maintaining the territory and sovereignty of the nation.
- A prosperous nation that can improve the quality of life and welfare of its people.
- A well developed democratic system with a matured national culture that preserves the values of freedom, equality, and humanistic esteem.
- A nation contributing to global peace and human prosperity.
- A peacefully reunified nation.<sup>2</sup>

The Republic of Korea's national interests in the region stem from these desirable conditions.

### **Vital interests**

Vital interests in the region are those which, if damaged, would have an immediate consequence for core national interests.<sup>3</sup> If these are threatened, these interests require significant amounts of money, time, energy, and (or) political/military capital to protect or secure. The vital national interests of the ROK in this region are related to security or economy issues.

*No threat of invasion by other countries* is very vital to the security of the ROK. The Korean people have a history of being invaded by foreign countries. In this century, the Korean Peninsula was occupied by Japan and the ROK was invaded by North Korea. The threat of invasion by North Korea still exists.

*Reduced tension with North Korea*, therefore, is another vital

interest of the ROK. In this context, the Korean people believe the alliance with the United States is also vital to the security of the country. This relationship is confirmed through the Security Consultative Meeting (SCM) and the Military Committee Meeting (MCM) every year. *Freedom from nuclear threat* is another vital ROK security interest. The ROK declared a non-nuclear policy in 1991. Both South and North Korea agreed on the denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula on Dec 31, 1991.<sup>4</sup> North Korea, however, has apparently continued its program to develop nuclear weapons. A final vital security interest, based on the strong emotions of the Korean people, is the *sovereignty of "Tok-do" island*, a small island located in the East Sea. The ROK National Police secure the island, but Japan also claims sovereignty over Tok-do.

There are also some vital national interests in the economic fields. The Korean economy depends largely upon export. *Free access to foreign markets* is vital to the Korean economy. The ROK lacks many important natural resources. It imports most raw materials, including all the petroleum, from foreign countries. Therefore, *free access to raw materials* is vital to the ROK. Because the Korean economy depends upon trade with foreign countries all over the world, *unrestricted passage through international waters* is a vital interest. The ROK has very limited resources, but potential seabed resources are one possible solution to the problem. In this regard, *economic sovereignty over adjacent seabeds* in the Yellow Sea and the South

Sea is vital to the national interests of the ROK. The ROK has moved beyond labor-centered industries and so it is also a vital economic interests for the ROK to develop *the advanced science and technology* which can produce high profits, using an educated, well-paid work force.

### **Important interests**

Important interests in the region are those which, if damaged, could eventually affect core national interests. There are more links in the subordinate connectivity chain than that for vital interests. If under threat or in competition with vital interests, these important interests would receive less resources in terms of money, time, energy and political-military capital. Important interests can be found across many areas and issues.

A friendly ROK relationship with Japan, China, and Russia is very important for the stability of the region, and will contribute to loosening the tension with North Korea. A peaceful relationship among the United States, Japan, China, and Russia is also important for stability in the region and the security of Korea. An effective arms control regime in the region would also contribute to regional stability, and so is an important interest to Korea.

In the economic area, technological support and coordination among the nations in the region is important for the development of the regional economy. Ensured foreign investment is also important to the Korean economy. The ROK must be able to both

receive foreign capital and invest its capital in foreign countries with the host nation government's guarantee of profit disposal. *Participation in the development of Siberia and Manchuria* is also an important national interest to the ROK.

In the political/ideological area, maintenance of a well developed democratic system is an important domestic (public) interest of the Korean people. This includes the effective interdiction of communism. A matured culture is also an important interest for preservation of the traditional Korean value system. Cultural exchange in the region is an important aspect of development and contributes to healthy international relationships. In the international political area, a leading role in world and regional organizations is important to enhance national dignity.

As a precondition of reunification, North Korea's responsible participation in world society is important. It is not beneficial to Korea and the region to leave North Korea as an international orphan. To generate the foundation of reunification, free communication, trade, and traffic between South and North Korea are important.

### **Factors Affecting Korea's Interests in the Region**

#### **Political**

Since the cold war ended, the characteristics of United

States politics have changed from so called *high politics* to *low politics*, in which economic issues have priority.<sup>5</sup> In order to maintain a uni-multipolar system in which the US is the only military super power in a politically multi-polar world, it is likely that the United States will pursue a "Pax-Americana" policy, exerting its influence to assure international stability in ways consistent with its own national interests. In Northeast Asia, the US will tend to behave as a crisis manager, coordinator, and balancer. US diplomacy in the region will emphasize arms control and the reduction and non-proliferation of weapons of mass destruction. The United States will try to maintain its influence on the Korean Peninsula.

Japan wants to enhance its role in the political and military area. With US security support, Japan has accomplished splendid economic success. Now, some Japanese people think that their political and military influence in the region and the world should match their economic capability and influence. In this regard, Japan will participate more actively in UN peacekeeping operations. It may also establish a diplomatic relationship with North Korea in the near future. Japan may prefer the status quo on the Korean Peninsula, since some Japanese may believe that a reunified Korea could be a threat, or at least would not be beneficial to its national interests.

China established diplomatic relations with Japan in 1972, the US in 1978, and Korea in 1992. On the basis of a pragmatic perspective, China is likely to place priority of politics and

diplomacy on economic development. Believing that their political role had been too weak in the cold war age, the Chinese people will seek to enlarge their influence in the world and the region. China prefers stability on the Korean peninsula because peaceful conditions favor further Chinese economic development. They will pursue the status quo in Korea, maintaining the same distance from South and North Korea. They may believe this will increase their influence on the peninsula. China clearly wants to have more interaction and cooperation in the economic area. Chinese trade and technological cooperation with the ROK are increasing continuously.

Access to an ice-free harbor has traditionally been one of Russia's great interests in East Asia. As the former USSR declared that it was one of the Asian countries, Russia also intends to become a central state in the Pacific Economic bloc through the development of Siberia. Russia supports the stability of the region because it is beneficial to its economic development. Russia prefers the status quo on the Korean Peninsula. It will maintain the same distance from South and North Korea. This policy is very much different from their past pro-North policy, and can be expected to continue for an extended period. Russia wants to enlarge economic cooperation with South Korea.

### **Economic**

Past US national interest in the region has largely been

associated with security issues. However, Northeast Asia has become the most important region to the US in economic terms. The rapid economic growth of the region contributes to US exports and the creation of jobs for the American people. However, the US has chronic trade deficits with some Asian nations, notably Japan and China. To address this problem, the US will continue to pursue open markets and guarantees for intellectual property rights. This economic policy will have some negative effects on the regional economy. Korea has exported more goods to the US than it has imported from it. It contributed much to the development of the Korean economy. However, US pressure to open the market will threaten the survival of many Korean companies with weak competability.

Japan emphasizes the importance of economic power rather than military power in international politics and in enlarging its international influence. Japan has invested heavily in the region and wants to protect its regional resources and markets. Korea suffers from a significant trade deficit with Japan. If this serious problem is not solved, it will result in difficulties in other areas.

China has put the highest priority on economic development. The Chinese established diplomatic relations with South Korea for economic reasons. China expects investment, technological cooperation, and economic support from South Korea. They believe that South Korea can give them great support, while North Korea only requests help from them. They want peace and less tension on

the Korean Peninsula because stability is desirable for their economy. After a decade or two, China will become an economic super power in its own right. This will be an important factor in regional and global power relationships.

The former Soviet Union established diplomatic relations with Korea to acquire investment and the technological cooperation. Trade with Russia is continuously increasing: 290 million dollars in 1988, 600 million dollars in 1989, 890 million dollars in 1990, and 1.2 billion dollars in 1991.<sup>6</sup> The industrial organizations of both countries supplement each other. While Korea exports consumer goods and final products, Russia exports natural resources and intermediate products. Through the development of oil, natural gas, and the forests in Siberia, Russia hopes to build a Northeast Asia Economic Bloc consisting of Korea, Japan, China, and Russia.

### **Security and Defense**

As the Cold War ended, the United States began to cut its defense budget. The United States could not maintain its forward stationing strategy and reduced the forces stationed in foreign countries. Asian nations expect to see U.S. strategy grow more isolationist. Although the US can't maintain large numbers of forces in the region, it will want to maintain some military presence in the region as a balancer. The United States has maintained bilateral security treaties with Korea and Japan and a commitment under the Taiwan Relations Act to the security of

Taiwan and can also be expected to maintain these relationships in the future. The US has begun to support multilateral security approaches in the region.

On October 21, 1994, the US and North Korea signed an "Agreed Framework" which is designed to provide the procedure to resolve the dispute over North Korea's nuclear weapons program. Generally, the Agreed Framework obligates North Korea to eliminate its existing capability to produce weapons grade plutonium, resume full membership in the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty, consistently take steps to execute the North-South Joint Declaration on the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula, and engage in North-South dialogue. According to the agreement, the Korean Peninsula Energy Development Organization (KEDO) will provide North Korea with two 1,000 MW light water reactor power plants which are priced at some 4 billion dollars, and 500,000 tons of heavy oil annually to compensate for the capacity of the graphite-modulated reactors. The US and North Korea also agreed to open liaison offices in each others' capitals, and to reduce barriers to trade and investment.<sup>7</sup> If the US fails to stop the North Korean nuclear project, it can expect further proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, not only in Northeast Asia, but also in other regions. The US can be expected to maintain contact with North Korea until the entire question is resolved, but is relying on South Korea and Japan to provide most of the financial support for the Agreed Framework.

Japanese security policy will continue to be based on its

bilateral security relationship with the U.S. With the end of the cold war, however, Japan perceives that the situation is not stable because so far no new order has effectively replaced the old order. Many Japanese people believe that their political and military role should be increased in the region and the world. If the US reduces its role in the region, Japan may be undoubtedly expected to replace the US in significant portion. Japan will participate more actively in UN peacekeeping operations. Japan has the capability to join the nuclear club. If the North Korean nuclear question is not solved at a satisfactory level, the Japanese are likely to try to develop their own nuclear weapons. Japan is also very sensitive to the possibility that China will emerge as the super power in the region. Japan will probably try to maintain some kind of security relationship with both Korea and China.

China perceives the post-Cold War multi-polar system as a favorable condition for them. As the Soviet Union collapsed, Chinese influence has increased. China wants to be a global super power in the world, and the preeminent power in the region. However, it does not want Japan to become a military power. Although the Chinese have nuclear weapons, they oppose North Korean efforts to develop them. China does not want regional problems to become international issues, because they may then draw in external intervention. Thus, China seeks resolution of regional problems by actors within the region.

Russia still has strong military forces in the region and

will try to conduct a leading role based on its military capability. Russia will oppose Japanese and Chinese efforts to enlarge their roles in the region. However, because of economic problems, Russian influence in the region will be significantly lessened in the near to mid-term.

In the Asia-Pacific region, there is a need for a multilateral security cooperation system. The first reason for this is the changes in the pattern of power relationships caused by the economical development of the nations in the region, including Japan and new developing countries. The second reason is the need for resolving instable factors which exist in spite of economic success.<sup>8</sup> Thirdly, the increased economic cooperation in other regions--the European Union's (EU) unilateral market policy, NAFTA, etc--encourage cooperation in Asia.<sup>9</sup> Fourthly, based on their growing economic capability, Asian people and their leaders demand cooperation rather than competition.

These needs are not directly linked to the organization of collective security systems. Instead, there have been some economic cooperation systems, some of which were enlarged to include security cooperation. The Association of South East Asian Nations (ASEAN) Post-Ministerial Committee (ASEAN-PMC), ASEAN-PMC Senior Officials Meeting (ASEAN-PMC SOM), and the ASEAN Regional Forum (ARF) are examples which developed from ASEAN for security cooperation. The Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC) Forum remains as an economic cooperation system.<sup>10</sup> In addition to these, there are many cooperation systems which are still at the

proposal stage. All-Asian Security and Cooperation Conference (proposed in 1989), All-Asian Process (1989), Pan-Asian Forum (1990), Eight Countries Forum (1989), East Asia Economic Caucus (EAEC: 1990), North-Pacific Cooperation and Security Dialogue (NPCSD: 1990)<sup>11</sup>, Conference on Security and Cooperation in Asia (CSCA: 1990), Rim-Japan Sea Economic Bloc (1990)<sup>12</sup>, Mini-CSCE (1993), Northeast Asia Cooperation Council (NACC: 1993), Council for Security Cooperation in Asia Pacific (CSCAP: 1993)<sup>13</sup>, and New Pacific Community (NPC: 1993) are examples.

Although many Asia Pacific countries--the US, Korea, Japan, Australia, Canada, ASEAN, etc--have proposed new security cooperation organizations, it will take long time to organize them and let them function well. There are some barriers which make it difficult. First, there exist too much difference among the nations in the region. They have different political systems, cultures, languages, and religions. Secondly, they have no historical experience of being integrated. Thirdly, there is no nation that can assume the leadership role. Japan has the capability to conduct such a role, but the other countries are not willing to accept Japan as a leader because of its colonial history. Because of these limitations, it is very difficult to organize an effective multilateral security cooperation system in the region.

In accordance with the change in the security environment, including diplomatic normalization with Russia and China which followed the Korean government's Northern Policy, Korea enlarged

its military contacts with neighboring countries. Defense Minister Byung-Tae Rhee's visit to Japan and Russia in 1994 is an example. In spite of its close historic and geological relationship with Japan and Russia, Korea's military exchange and cooperation has so far been very limited. Korea agreed with Japan to have frequent meetings between ministers and working level officers, enlarge exchange visits, including Naval Academy cadet cruises and Defense College students, and exerted mutual efforts to prevent military aircraft accidents. According to the "Memorandum of Understanding on Military Exchange", Korea is expected to gradually promote military relations with Russia by expanding military personnel exchange and reciprocal cooperation. As Korea and China exchanged Defense Attaches in 1993 and 1994, formal military relations between the two countries became possible.<sup>14</sup>

While the multilateral systems have limitations, the triangular security cooperation system among Korea, the US, and Japan is more likely to contribute practically to the stability of the region and to be enlarged to an expanded multilateral system. It was initiated in 1991 as a part of cooperative countermeasures against the North Korean nuclear issue. The three governments agreed to solve the nuclear issue by diplomatic dialogue, support UN resolutions of sanction, and build a Theater Missile Defense (TMD) system. It is expected to be a prestep to a future multilateral organization.<sup>15</sup>

### **Potential Flash Points**

The biggest potential flash point in this region is the development of the North-South Korea relationship. South Korea wants peaceful reunification. It hopes the North regime will become more responsible in international society. However, there are some indications that North Korea is not in a stable condition since Kim Il-Sung died. Kim Jung-Il was believed to have assumed his father's role immediately, but he has not yet officially taken the position of either state chief or party chief. Although North Korea is believed to suffer from serious food shortage, it alternately requests and refuses food assistance from international society. North Korean government officials most recently announced that they would refuse the food assistance from international society because the military opposed it. This may indicate that the military has a bigger voice than they had before. When there is a crisis in the power struggle within the regime, North Korea may choose war to divert its people's interests. If North Korea undergoes a radical change, refugees can be a big issue for China, South Korea, and, possibly, Japan and Russia.

Territorial claims may become significant issues for the countries in the region. The Northern Territories may become a big issue between Japan and Russia. Tok-do island can be an issue between Korea and Japan. The seabeds in the Yellow Sea and the South Sea may become conflicting issues between China and Korea. EEZ's will conflict one another. The development of the Taiwan

issue will also influence the Korean situation.

### **Policy Recommendations**

The most beneficial security apparatus in the region would be a multilateral security cooperation system. It is very difficult to establish collective security or collective defense organizations in the region because the regional nations have too many different interests and threats. However, security cooperation will be possible if the focus is on preventive diplomacy.<sup>16</sup> I believe the most promising mechanism for this kind of multilateral interaction would be a *Conference on Security and Cooperation in Northeast Asia* (CSCNEA). The member countries should include South and North Korea (and eventually a reunified Korea), the United States, Japan, China, and Russia. The conference on Security and Cooperation in Europe (CSCE) can be a model.

It will be difficult to establish this organization all at once. The lack of confidence between South and North Korea will be serious barrier. The four major countries may be able to help South and North Korea build confidence. Increased contacts in the political and military area, as well as the economic area, will help establish the organization.

Before the CSCNEA is organized, it is desirable to enlarge bilateral relations. In addition to the existing ROK & US Mutual Defense Treaty, the ROK needs to build official bilateral

security cooperation relationships with Japan, China, Russia, and hopefully North Korea. Such bilateral security cooperation systems between ROK & Japan, ROK & China, and ROK & Russia will contribute to the stability of the region. These bilateral systems will encourage further bilateral systems between other countries in the region. When most countries have bilateral relations with one another, it will be easier to establish a multilateral system in the region. In a new multilateral security cooperation system, the ROK does not have to seek a preeminent local power. Instead, the ROK can serve as an honest mediator in the region.



### Endnotes

1. Kee-Hyun Shin, "Prospects and Responses to the Potential Threatening Structures of Regional Security", Chollyak-Nonchong (Readings in Strategy) Vol 3, (1994): 102-108
2. Dong-Won Lim, "The National Strategy of the Republic of Korea", Kookga-Chollyak (National Strategy) Vol 1, NO 1, (Spring/Summer, 1995): 18-20
3. The classification and definition of national interests by intensity level are derived from the US Army War College definition in the Course Directive of the Regional Strategic Appraisals in 1996. The US Army War College classifies National Interests into vital, important, and peripheral interests in terms of intensity.
4. The event that brought about the denuclearization agreement was the "Agreement on Reconciliation, Nonaggression, Exchanges, and Cooperation between the North and the South." It committed the two Koreas to respect each other's government, to refrain from the use of force against each other, to create a joint commission to consider alleged violations of the armistice, to set up a hot line between Pyongyang and Seoul, and to establish economic and other contacts. In the "Joint Declaration of the Denuclearization of the Korean Peninsula", the two sides agreed not to acquire nuclear arms, nuclear fuel reprocessing, or uranium-enrichment capabilities and to establish a joint commission to inspect sites in both sides. North Korea agreed to inspection of its nuclear power and research facilities by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). The agreement is quoted in Vera Simone and Anne Thompson Feraru, The Asian Pacific: Political and Economic Development in a Global Context (White Plains: Longman Publisher, 1995): 296
5. "High-politics" refers to politics in which nations focus on issues like politics, defense, diplomacy, and security. However, in "low-politics", the nations pursue economic interactions, technological cooperation, social welfare, and economic development. In low politics, nations need a peaceful world order more than in high-politics. Refer to Myung-Hyun Cho, "The emerging Northeast Asian Cooperative Security System Model and Response", Chollyak-Nonchong (Readings in Strategy), Vol 3(1994): 30-31, 36-37.
6. Myung-Hyun Cho, "The Emerging Northeast Asian Cooperative Security System Model and Response", Chollyak-Nonchong (Readings in Strategy), Vol 3(1994): 44
7. Thomas L. Wilborn, "Strategic Implications of the US-DPRK Framework Agreement"(Strategic Studies Institute: 1994): v-vi

8. Although there is no hot war in the Asia-Pacific region at this moment, there are some potential conflicts which can escalate to hot war very easily. The Spratly Islands issue among China and some countries in the region, the Northern Islands between Japan and Russia, the Cambodian Civil War, the cold war between South and North Koreas, and tension in the Taiwan Straits are examples. The nations in the region are very sensitive to China's rapid economic development and military modernization. Russia's unstable domestic situation and weapons purchase competition among Southeast Asian countries are also among the factors that create an unstable situation. Asian countries imported 35% of the total weapons imported in the world during 1988 through 1991. Furthermore, the defense budgets in the region are increasing. If these trends continue, Asia is expected to be the most severe arms competition region in the world in the 21st century.

9. Hong-Pyo Lee, "The Northeast Asia Economic Cooperation Organization Initiative and Regional Security", Readings in Multilateral Security Cooperation System(1994): 47-48

10. APEC was agreed to be organized in 1989. It had the first meeting in Sidney in 1989, second meeting in Singapore, third meeting in Seoul, fourth meeting in Bangkok, and fifth meeting in Seattle. The initial members were the Republic of Korea, the US, Japan, Australia, Canada, New Zealand, and the ASEAN countries. At the Seoul meeting, three Chinas--PRC, Taiwan, and Hong Kong--joined the meeting.

11. It was proposed by Canada. Seven countries--South and North Korea, US, Russia, China, Japan, and Canada--participated.

12. It is the economic organization officially proposed by Japan. Five countries--South and North Korea, Japan, Russia, China participated.

13. This is an unofficial organization proposed by the United States and agreed to by the representatives from 10 major research institutes in the region--the US Pacific Forum/CSIS, Seoul International Forum, the Institutes for International Affairs in Japan, the Strategy and Defense Research Center of the Australian National University, etc--at the Malaysia Meeting in July 1993. Ten countries--South Korea, US, Japan, Australia, Canada, Indonesia, Malaysia, Philippines, Singapore, and Thailand--also participated.

14. Ministry of National defense, Defense White Paper: 1994-1995, (Seoul: 1994): 132-133

15. Jong-Chul Choi, "The US-Japan-ROK Triangular Security Cooperation System in the New International Order", Chollyak-Nonchong (Readings in Strategy): Vol 3, (Seoul: 1994): 231-237

16. Preventive diplomacy is defined as the diplomatic action in advance of a predictable crisis aimed at resolving disputes before violence breaks out. See US Army War College, "Terms and Definitions: United Nations", Readings in War, National Policy, and Strategy Vol I, Part B(US Army War College: 1995): 534



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11. US Army War College, "Terms and Definitions: United Nations", Readings in War, National Policy, and Strategy Vol I, Part B, US Army War College, 1995.
12. US Army War College, Course Directive: Regional Strategic Appraisal, 1996
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